HOW to

Prune Trees

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How to Prune Trees

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Introduction

The objective of pruning is to produce strong, healthy, attractive plants. By understanding how, when and why to prune, and by following a few simple principles, this objective can be achieved.

Reasons For Pruning

The main reasons for pruning ornamental and shade trees include safety, health, and aesthetics. In addition, pruning can be used to stimulate fruit production and increase the value of timber. Pruning for *safety* (Fig. 1A) involves removing branches that could fall and cause injury or property damage, trimming branches that interfere with lines of sight on streets or driveways, and removing branches that grow into utility lines. Safety pruning can be largely avoided by carefully choosing species that will not grow beyond the space available to them, and have strength and form characteristics that are suited to the site.

Pruning for *health* (Fig. 1B) involves removing diseased or insect-infested wood, thinning the crown to increase airflow and reduce some pest problems, and removing crossing and rubbing branches. Pruning can best be used to encourage trees to develop a strong structure and reduce the likelihood of damage during severe weather. Removing broken or damaged limbs encourages wound closure.

A. Safety

B. Health

C. Aesthetics

Figure 1. Reasons for pruning

Pruning for *aesthetics* (Fig. 1C) involves enhancing the natural form and character of trees or stimulating flower production. Pruning for form can be especially important for open-grown trees that do very little self-pruning.

All woody plants shed branches in response to shading and competition. Branches that do not produce enough carbohydrates from photosynthesis to sustain themselves die and are eventually shed; the resulting wounds are sealed by **woundwood** (callus). Branches that are poorly attached may be broken off by wind and accumulation of snow and ice. Branches removed by such natural forces often result in large, ragged wounds that rarely seal. Pruning as a cultural practice can be used to supplement or replace these natural processes and increase the strength and longevity of plants.

Trees have many forms, but the most common types are pyramidal (**excurrent**) or spherical (**decurrent**). Trees with pyramidal crowns, e.g., most conifers, have a strong central stem and lateral branches that are more or less horizontal and do not compete with the central stem for dominance. Trees with spherical crowns, e.g., most hardwoods, have many lateral branches that may compete for dominance.

To reduce the need for pruning it is best to consider a tree's natural form. It is very difficult to impose an unnatural form on a tree without a commitment to constant maintenance.

Pollarding and **topiary** are extreme examples of pruning to create a desired, unnatural effect. Pollarding is the practice of pruning trees annually to remove all new growth. The following year, a profusion of new branches is produced at the ends of the branches. Topiary involves pruning trees and shrubs into geometric or animal shapes. Both pollarding and topiary are specialized applications that involve pruning to change the natural form of trees. As topiary demonstrates, given enough care and attention plants can be pruned into nearly any form. Yet just as proper pruning can enhance the form or character of plants, improper pruning can destroy it.

Pruning Approaches

Producing strong structure should be the emphasis when pruning young trees. As trees mature, the aim of pruning will shift to maintaining tree structure, form, health and appearance.

Proper pruning cuts are made at a node, the point at which one branch or twig attaches to another. In the spring of the year growth begins at buds, and twigs grow until a new node is formed. The length of a branch between nodes is called an internode.

The most common types of pruning are:

1. *Crown Thinning* (Fig. 2)

Crown thinning, primarily for hardwoods, is the selective removal of branches to

increase light penetration and air movement throughout the crown of a tree. The intent is to maintain or develop a tree's structure and form. To avoid unnecessary stress and prevent excessive production of epicormic sprouts, no more than one-quarter of the living crown should be removed at a time. If it is necessary to remove more, it should be done over successive years.

Figure 2. Crown thinning—branches to be removed are shaded in blue; pruning cuts should be made at the red lines. No more than one-fourth of the living branches should be removed at one time.

A. U-shaped strong union B. V-shaped weak union

Figure 3. Types of branch unions

Branches with strong U-shaped angles of attachment should be retained (Fig. 3A). Branches with narrow, V-shaped angles of attachment often form **included bark** and should be removed (Fig. 3B). Included bark forms when two branches grow at sharply acute angles to one another, producing a wedge of inward-rolled bark between them. Included bark prevents strong attachment of branches, often causing a crack at the point below where the branches meet. Codominant stems that are approximately the same size and arise from the same position often form included bark. Removing some of the lateral branches from a codominant stem can reduce its growth enough to allow the other stem to become dominant.

Lateral branches should be no more than one-half to three-quarters of the diameter of the stem at the point of attachment. Avoid producing "lion's tails," tufts of branches and foliage at the ends of branches, caused by removing all inner lateral branches and foliage. Lion's tails can result in sunscalding,

abundant **epicormic sprouts**, and weak branch structure and breakage. Branches that rub or cross another branch should be removed.

Conifers that have branches in whorls and pyramidal crowns rarely need crown thinning except to restore a dominant leader. Occasionally, the leader of a tree may be damaged and multiple branches may become codominant. Select the strongest leader and remove competing branches to prevent the development of codominant stems.

2. *Crown Raising* (Fig. 4)

Crown raising is the practice of removing branches from the bottom of the crown of a tree to provide clearance for pedestrians, vehicles, buildings, lines of site, or to develop a clear stem for timber production. Also, removing lower branches on white pines can prevent blister rust. For street trees the minimum clearance is often specified by municipal ordinance. After pruning, the ratio of the living crown to total tree height should be at least two-thirds (e.g., a 12 m tree should have living branches on at least the upper 8 m).

On young trees "temporary" branches may be retained along the stem to encourage taper and protect trees from vandalism and sunscald. Less vigorous shoots should be selected as temporary branches and should be about 10 to 15 cm apart along the stem. They should be pruned annually to slow their growth and should be removed eventually.

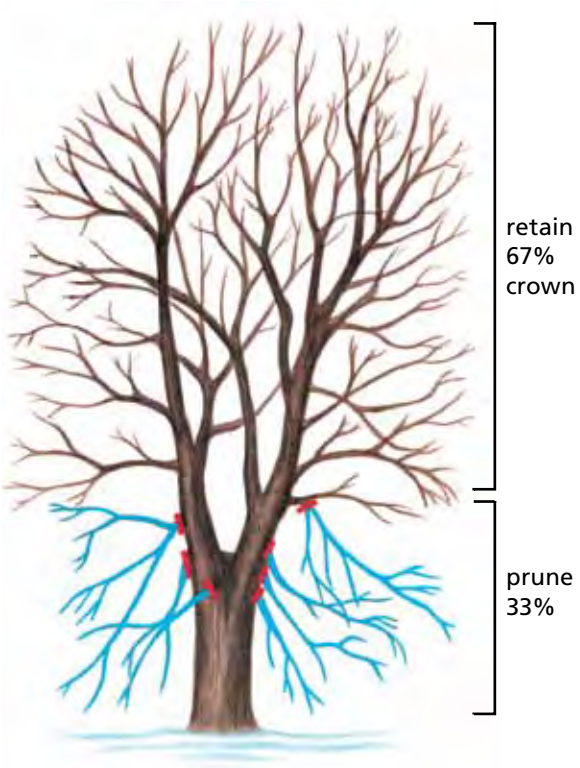


Figure 4. Crown raising—branches to be removed are shaded in blue; pruning cuts should be made where indicated with red lines. The ratio of live crown to total tree height should be at least two-thirds.

3. *Crown Reduction* (Fig. 5)

Crown reduction pruning is most often used when a tree has grown too large for its permitted space. This method, sometimes called **drop crotch pruning**, is preferred to topping because it results in a more natural appearance, increases the time before pruning is needed again, and minimizes stress (see drop crotch cuts in the next section).

Crown reduction pruning, a method of last resort, often results in large pruning wounds

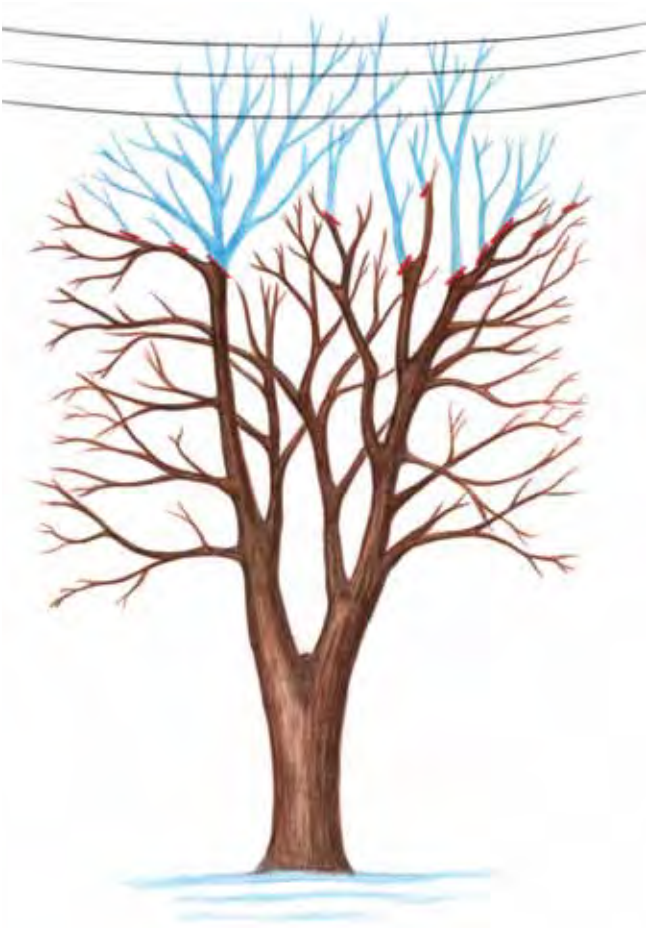


Figure 5. Crown reduction—branches to be removed are shaded in blue; pruning cuts should be made where indicated with red lines. To prevent branch dieback, cuts should be made at lateral branches that are at least one-third the diameter of the stem at their union.

to stems that may lead to decay. This method should never be used on a tree with a pyramidal growth form. A better long term solution is to remove the tree and replace it with a tree that will not grow beyond the available space.

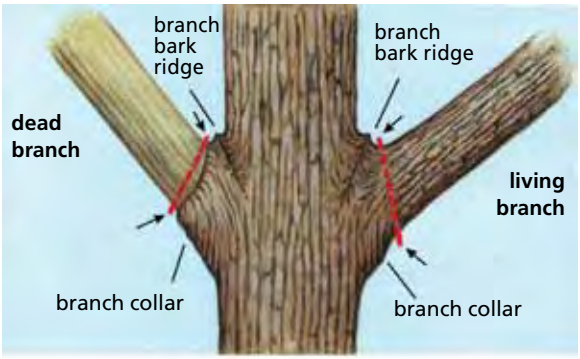
Pruning Cuts

Pruning cuts should be made so that only branch tissue is removed and stem tissue is not damaged. At the point where the branch attaches to the stem, branch and stem tissues remain separate, but are contiguous. If only branch tissues are cut when pruning, the stem tissues of the tree will probably not become decayed, and the wound will seal more effectively.

1. *Pruning living branches* (Fig. 6)

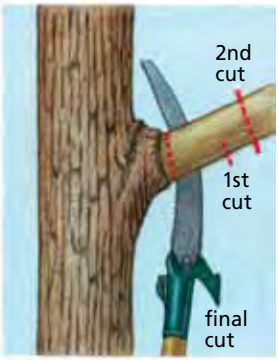
To find the proper place to cut a branch, look for the **branch collar** that grows from the stem tissue at the underside of the base of the branch (Fig. 6A). On the upper surface, there is usually a **branch bark ridge** that runs (more or less) parallel to the branch angle, along the stem of the tree. A proper pruning cut does not damage either the branch bark ridge or the branch collar.

A proper cut begins just outside the branch bark ridge and angles down away from the stem of the tree, avoiding injury to the branch collar (Fig. 6B). Make the cut as close as possible to the stem in the **branch axil**, but outside the branch bark ridge, so that stem tissue is not injured and the wound can seal in the shortest time possible. If the cut is too far from the stem, leaving a branch stub, the branch tissue usually dies and woundwood forms from the stem tissue. Wound closure is delayed because the woundwood must seal over the stub that was left.

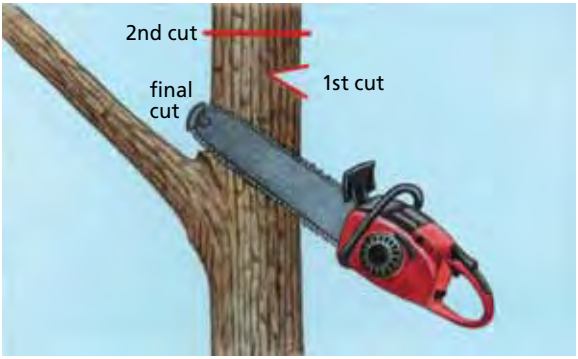


A. Targeting the cut

B. Cutting a small branch



C. Cutting a larger branch



D. Crown reduction cut

Figure 6. Pruning cuts

The quality of pruning cuts can be evaluated by examining pruning wounds after one growing season. A concentric ring of woundwood will form from proper pruning

cuts (Fig. 6B). **Flush cuts** made inside the branch bark ridge or branch collar, result in pronounced development of woundwood on the sides of the pruning wounds with very little woundwood forming on the top or bottom (Fig. 7D). As described above, stub cuts result in the death of the remaining branch and woundwood forms around the base from stem tissues.

When pruning small branches with hand pruners, make sure the tools are sharp enough to cut the branches cleanly without tearing. Branches large enough to require saws should be supported with one hand while the cuts are made. If the branch is too large to support, make a three-step pruning cut (Fig. 6C) to prevent bark ripping (Fig. 7C).

1. The first cut is a shallow notch made on the underside of the branch, outside the branch collar. This cut will prevent a falling branch from tearing the stem tissue as it pulls away from the tree.

2. The second cut should be outside the first cut, all the way through the branch, leaving a short stub.

3. The stub is then cut just outside the branch bark ridge/branch collar, completing the operation.

2. *Pruning dead branches* (Fig. 6)

Prune dead branches in much the same way as live branches. Making the correct cut is usually easy because the branch

collar and the branch bark ridge, can be distinguished from the dead branch, because they continue to grow (Fig. 6A). Make the pruning cut just outside of the ring of woundwood tissue that has formed, being careful not to cause unnecessary injury (Fig. 6C). Large dead branches should be supported with one hand or cut with the three-step method, just as live branches. Cutting large living branches with the three-step method is more critical because of the greater likelihood of bark ripping.

3. *Drop Crotch Cuts* (Fig. 6D)

A proper cut begins just above the branch bark ridge and extends through the stem parallel to the branch bark ridge. Usually, the stem being removed is too large to be supported with one hand, so the three-cut method should be used.

1. With the first cut, make a notch on the side of the stem away from the branch to be retained, well above the branch crotch.

2. Begin the second cut inside the branch crotch, staying well above the branch bark ridge, and cut through the stem above the notch.

3. Cut the remaining stub just inside the branch bark ridge through the stem parallel to the branch bark ridge.

To prevent the abundant growth of epicormic sprouts on the stem below the cut, or dieback of the stem to a lower lateral

branch, make the cut at a lateral branch that is at least one-third of the diameter of the stem at their union.

Pruning Practices That Harm Trees

Topping and **tipping** (Fig. 7A, 7B) are pruning practices that harm trees and should not be used. Crown reduction pruning (Fig. 5) is the preferred method to reduce the size or height of the crown of a tree, but is rarely needed and should be used infrequently.

Topping, the pruning of large upright branches between nodes, is sometimes done to reduce the height of a tree (Fig. 7A). Tipping is a practice of cutting lateral branches between nodes (Fig. 7B) to reduce crown width.

These practices invariably result in the development of epicormic sprouts**,** or in the death of the cut branch back to the next lateral branch below. These epicormic sprouts are weakly attached to the stem and eventually will be supported by a decaying branch.

Improper pruning cuts cause unnecessary injury and bark ripping (Fig. 7C). **Flush cuts** injure stem tissues and can result in decay (Fig. 7D). **Stub cuts** delay wound closure and can provide entry to canker fungi that kill the cambium, delaying or preventing woundwood formation (Fig. 7E).

A. Topping

B. Tipping

C. Bark ripping

D. Flush cutting

E. Stub cutting

Figure 7. Practices that harm trees

When to Prune

Conifers may be pruned any time of year, but pruning during the dormant season may minimize sap and resin flow from cut branches.

Hardwood trees and shrubs without showy flowers: prune in the dormant season to easily visualize the structure of the tree, to maximize wound closure in the growing season after pruning, to reduce the chance of transmitting disease, and to discourage excessive sap flow from wounds. Recent wounds and the chemical scents they emit can actually attract insects that spread tree disease. In particular, wounded elm wood is known to attract bark beetles that harbor spores of the Dutch elm disease fungus, and open wounds on oaks are known to attract beetles that spread the oak wilt fungus. Take care to prune these trees during the correct time of year to prevent spread of these fatal diseases. Contact your local tree disease specialist to find out when to prune these tree species in your area. Usually, the best time is during the late fall and winter.

Flowering trees and shrubs: these should also be pruned during the dormant season for the same reasons stated above; however, to preserve the current year's flower crop, prune according to the following schedule:

- Trees and shrubs that flower in early spring (redbud, dogwood, etc.) should be pruned immediately after

flowering (flower buds arise the year before they flush, and will form on the new growth).

- Many flowering trees are susceptible to fireblight, a bacterial disease that can be spread by pruning. These trees, including many varieties of crabapple, hawthorn, pear, mountain ash, flowering quince and pyracantha, should be pruned during the dormant season. Check with your county extension agent or a horticulturist for additional information.

- Trees and shrubs that flower in the summer or fall always should be pruned during the dormant season (flower buds will form on new twigs during the next growing season, and the flowers will flush normally).

Dead branches: can be removed any time of the year.

Pruning Tools

Proper tools are essential for satisfactory pruning (Fig. 6). The choice of which tool to use depends largely on the size of branches to be pruned and the amount of pruning to be done. If possible, test a tool before you buy it to ensure it suits your specific needs. As with most things, higher quality often equates to higher cost.

Generally speaking, the smaller a branch is when pruned, the sooner the wound created will seal. Hand pruners are used to prune small branches (under 2.5 cm diameter) and many different kinds are available. Hand pruners can be grouped into bypass or anvil styles based on the blade configuration. Anvil style pruners have a straight blade that cuts the branch against a small anvil or block as the handles are squeezed. Bypass pruners use a curved cutting blade that slides past a broader lower blade, much like a scissors. To prevent unnecessary tearing or crushing of tissues, it is best to use a bypass style pruner. Left- or right-handed types can be purchased.

Slightly larger branches that cannot be cut with a hand pruner may be cut with small pruning saws (up to 10 cm) or lopping shears (up to 7 cm diameter) with larger cutting surfaces and greater leverage. Lopping shears are also available in bypass and anvil styles.

For branches too large to be cut with a hand pruner or lopping shears, pruning saws must be used. Pruning saws differ greatly in handle styles, the length and shape of the blade, and the layout and type of teeth. Most have tempered metal blades that retain their sharpness for many pruning cuts. Unlike most other saws, pruning saws are often designed to cut on the "pull-stroke."

Chain saws are preferred when pruning branches larger than about 10 cm. Chain saws should be used only by qualified

individuals. To avoid the need to cut branches greater than 10 cm diameter, prune when branches are small.

Pole pruners must be used to cut branches beyond reach. Generally, pruning heads can cut branches up to 4.4 cm diameter and are available in the bypass and anvil styles. Once again, the bypass type is preferred. For cutting larger branches, saw blades can be fastened directly to the pruning head, or a separate saw head can be purchased. Because of the danger of electrocution, pole pruners should not be used near utility lines, except by qualified utility line clearance personnel.

To ensure that satisfactory cuts are made and to reduce fatigue, keep your pruning tools sharp and in good working condition. Hand pruners, lopping shears, and pole pruners should be periodically sharpened with a sharpening stone. Replacement blades are available for many styles. Pruning saws should be professionally sharpened or periodically replaced. To reduce cost, many styles have replaceable blades.

Tools should be clean and sanitized as well as sharp. Although sanitizing tools may be inconvenient and seldom practiced, doing so may prevent the spread of disease from infected to healthy trees on contaminated tools. Tools become contaminated when they come into contact with fungi, bacteria, viruses and other microorganisms that cause disease in trees. Most pathogens need some way of entering the tree to cause disease, and

fresh wounds are perfect places for infections to begin. Microorganisms on tool surfaces are easily introduced into susceptible trees when subsequent cuts are made. The need for sanitizing tools can be greatly reduced by pruning during the dormant season.

If sanitizing is necessary it should be practiced as follows: before each branch is cut, sanitize pruning tools with either 70% denatured alcohol, or with liquid household bleach diluted 1 to 9 with water (1 part bleach, 9 parts water). Tools should be immersed in the solution, preferably for 1-2 minutes, and wood particles should be wiped from all cutting surfaces. Bleach is corrosive to metal surfaces, so tools should be thoroughly cleaned with soap and water after each use.

Treating Wounds

Tree sap, gums, and resins are the natural means by which trees combat invasion by pathogens. Although unsightly, sap flow from pruning wounds is not generally harmful; however, excessive "bleeding" can weaken trees.

When oaks or elms are wounded during a critical time of year (usually spring for oaks, or throughout the growing season for elms) — either from storms, other unforeseen mechanical wounds, or from necessary branch removals — some type of wound dressing should be applied to the wound.

Do this immediately after the wound is created. In most other instances, wound dressings are unnecessary, and may even be detrimental. Wound dressings will not stop decay or cure infectious diseases. They may actually interfere with the protective benefits of tree gums and resins, and prevent wound surfaces from closing as quickly as they might under natural conditions. The only benefit of wound dressings is to prevent introduction of pathogens in the specific cases of Dutch elm disease and oak wilt.

Pruning Guidelines

To encourage the development of a strong, healthy tree, consider the following guidelines when pruning.

1. *General*

- Prune first for safety, next for health, and finally for aesthetics.
- Never prune trees that are touching or near utility lines; instead consult your local utility company.
- Avoid pruning trees when you might increase susceptibility to important pests (e.g., in areas where oak wilt exists, avoid pruning oaks in the spring and early summer; prune trees susceptible to fireblight only during the dormant season).
- Use the following decision guide for size of branches to be removed:

1) under 5 cm diameter - go ahead, 2) between 5 and 10 cm diameter - think twice, and 3) greater than 10 cm diameter - have a good reason.

2. *Crown Thinning*

- Assess how a tree will be pruned from the top down.
- Favor branches with strong, U-shaped angles of attachment. Remove branches with weak, V-shaped angles of attachment and/or included bark.
- Ideally, lateral branches should be evenly spaced on the main stem of young trees.
- Remove any branches that rub or cross another branch.
- Make sure that lateral branches are no more than one-half to three-quarters of the diameter of the stem to discourage the development of co-dominant stems.
- Do not remove more than one-quarter of the living crown of a tree at one time. If it is necessary to remove more, do it over successive years.

3. *Crown Raising*

- Always maintain live branches on at least two-thirds of a tree's total height. Removing too many lower branches will hinder the development of a strong stem.

- Remove basal sprouts and vigorous epicormic sprouts.

4. *Crown Reduction*

- Use crown reduction pruning only when absolutely necessary. Make the pruning cut at a lateral branch that is at least one-third the diameter of the stem to be removed.

- If it is necessary to remove more than half of the foliage from a branch, remove the entire branch.

Glossary

Branch Axil: the angle formed where a branch joins another branch or stem of a woody plant.

Branch Bark Ridge: a ridge of bark that forms in a branch crotch and partially around the stem resulting from the growth of the stem and branch tissues against one another.

Branch Collar: a "shoulder" or bulge formed at the base of a branch by the annual production of overlapping layers of branch and stem tissues.

Crown Raising: a method of pruning to provide clearance for pedestrians, vehicles, buildings, lines of sight, and vistas by removing lower branches.

Crown Reduction Pruning: a method of pruning used to reduce the height of a tree. Branches are cut back to laterals that are at least one-third the diameter of the limb being removed.

Crown Thinning: a method of pruning to increase light penetration and air movement through the crown of a tree by selective removal of branches.

Callus: see woundwood.

Decurrent: a major tree form resulting from weak apical control. Trees with this form have several to many lateral branches that compete with the central stem for dominance resulting in a spherical or globose crown. Most hardwood trees have decurrent forms.

Epicormic Sprout: a shoot that arises from a latent or adventitious bud. Epicormic sprouts are also known as water sprouts that grow from stems and branches, and suckers that are produced from the base of trees. In older wood, epicormic shoots often result from severe defoliation or radical pruning.

Excurrent: a major tree form resulting from strong apical control. Trees with this form have a strong central stem and pyramidal shape. Lateral branches rarely compete for dominance. Most conifers and a few hardwoods, such as sweetgum and tuliptree, have excurrent forms.

Flush Cuts: pruning cuts that originate inside the branch bark ridge or the branch collar, causing unnecessary injury to stem tissues.

Included Bark: bark enclosed between branches with narrow angles of attachment, forming a wedge between the branches.

Pollarding: the annual removal of all of the previous year's growth, resulting in a flush of slender shoots and branches each spring.

Stub Cuts: pruning cuts made too far outside the branch bark ridge or branch collar, that leave branch tissue attached to the stem.

Tipping: a poor maintenance practice used to control the size of tree crowns; involves the cutting of branches at right angles leaving long stubs.

Topping: a poor maintenance practice often used to control the size of trees; involves the indiscriminate cutting of branches and stems at right angles leaving long stubs. Synonyms include rounding-over, heading-back, dehorning, capping and hat-racking. Topping is often improperly referred to as pollarding.

Topiary: the pruning and training of a plant into a desired geometric or animal shape.

Woundwood: lignified, differentiated tissues produced on woody plants as a response to wounding (also known as callus tissue).

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Notes:

"How to Prune Trees" was written to help people properly prune the trees they care about. If you doubt your ability to safely prune large trees, please hire a professional arborist. Information in this publication can be used to interview and hire a competent arborist.

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